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Developing Positive Identities

Diversity and Young Children

EARLY CHILDHOOD IN FOCUS

Series edited by Martin Woodhead and John Oates

Early Childhood in Focus is a series of publications produced by the Child and Youth Studies Group at The Open University, United Kingdom, with the support of the Bernard van Leer Foundation.

The series provides accessible and clear reviews of the best and most recent available research, information and analysis on key policy issues, offering clear messages on core policy topics and questions, relevant to the Foundation's three themes of Strengthening the Care Environment, Successful Transitions, and Social Inclusion and Respect for Diversity.

Each publication is developed in consultation with world leaders in research, policy, advocacy and children's rights. Many of these experts have written summaries of key messages from their areas of work especially for the series, and the accuracy of the content has been assured by independent academic assessors, themselves experts in the field of early childhood.

The themes of the series have been chosen to reflect topics of research and knowledge development that address the most significant areas of children's rights, and where a deeper understanding of the issues involved is crucial to the success of policy development programmes and their implementation.

These publications are intended to be of value to advocates for the rights of children and families, to policy makers at all levels, and to anyone working to improve the living conditions, quality of experience and life chances of young children throughout the world.

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Developing Positive Identities

Editors

Liz Brooker
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EARLY CHILDHOOD IN FOCUS 3

Diversity and Young Children

States parties undertake to respect the right of the child to preserve his or her identity, including nationality, name and family relations as recognized by law without unlawful interference.

(United Nations, 1989, Article 8)

Young children's earliest years are the foundation for their physical and mental health, emotional security, cultural and personal identity, and developing competencies.

(United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2005, Paragraph 6(e))

The young cannot pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. It is primarily through observing, playing and working with others older and younger than themselves that children discover both what they can do and who they can become – that they develop both their ability and their identity.

(after Bronfenbrenner, 1972, p. xv)

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Contents

<i>Preface</i>	ix
I. The right to identity and the development of identity ...	1
Legal identity is conferred by birth registration	2
Identity at birth – and identity in development?	4
Constructing and reconstructing identity	6
Young children talk about their age identity	8
Identity – or identities?	10
Defining positive identity	12
POLICY QUESTIONS	14
II. Developing positive identities	17
Constructing cultural identity within families	18
Family cultures shape identity in unique ways	20
Supporting identities through parenting programmes	22
The Mwana Mwende Project, Kenya	24
The challenge for early childhood education and care	26
Beyond colour-blindness and tokenism	28
An innovative programme in Belgium	30
POLICY QUESTIONS	32
III. Identities, friendships and peer cultures	35
The importance of friends	36
The value of friends	38
Friendships within peer cultures	40
Positive identities may lead to negative beliefs	42
Children's collaborative work on identity	44
Positive identities in a changing world	46
Achieving a resilient identity	48
POLICY QUESTIONS	50
<i>References</i>	52
<i>Photography</i>	55

Preface

Developing a positive identity is fundamental to realising every child's rights. It is at the heart of early childhood policies and practices as well as being a core topic for social research. This issue of Early Childhood in Focus builds on theory and evidence about what makes for positive identity, how it can be affected by adversities, social exclusion and discrimination, and how young children's resilience can be promoted.

Traditionally, identity formation has been perceived mainly as being about processes of development, socialisation and enculturation, with child-rearing experts offering wide-ranging views on how these can best be achieved. One prominent view has seen the young child as immature, unformed and dependent. Acquiring identity has been understood as a gradual process of embedding into the norms, values and social roles of the parents' culture, shaped by the training offered by parents and others. An alternative view has seen the child's identity as largely preformed, and maturing through play and exploration in the protected spaces offered by caring adults. Neither of these views accords with contemporary theories of identity formation, which respect children's unique identity at birth and their role in constructing and reconstructing personal meaning within cultural contexts. There is also increasing recognition that children (and adults) negotiate multiple, shifting and sometimes competing identities, especially within complex, multi-ethnic and multicultural contexts.

Identity is multidimensional in other senses too. A child's name and nationality are established at birth as their formal legal identity, while their personal identity develops throughout their life course. This is just one of the complexities to be considered in shaping policies and practices. Another complexity surrounds the definition of 'positive' identity, which cannot be understood by focusing on the individual child in isolation. Developing and maintaining identity is closely connected with wider processes of social inclusion or exclusion. This connection runs both ways, providing children with the opportunity to consolidate a secure sense of their own identities at the same time as enabling awareness of differences from others. The extent to which this process has positive outcomes depends a great deal on how far and in what ways children's social contexts (whether families, preschools or wider society) respect diversity. The care, guidance and teaching offered by parents, professionals and other adults are the major conduit through which children can be assured positive identities, but recognising children's own agency is also central. Recent research confirms the powerful role played by friends and peers, and offers insights into the ways that the developing of positive identity can be at the expense of other children, which is a further challenge for the development of inclusive policies and practices.

Liz Brooker
Martin Woodhead
Editors

I.

The right to identity and the development of identity



The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) affirms that every child has the right to a legal identity. This right is activated and safeguarded by birth registration.

Also from birth, every child begins the journey of constructing a unique personal and social identity which is characterised by a growing awareness of the importance of markers such as gender, ethnicity, age and status within the child's immediate community.

Before they begin school, many children demonstrate a clear understanding of their role and status at home, at preschool and in their neighbourhood, and of the impact of how they are treated on their sense of who they are.

Early identities are themselves complex, and they continue to change and grow as children experience new settings, activities, relationships and responsibilities.

In the process, children may form both positive, negative and ambivalent feelings about aspects of their changing identity.

Legal identity is conferred by birth registration

A birth certificate is the most visible evidence of respect for every child's unique identity

Identity is a legal concept within the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. It is every child's entitlement from birth.

The child shall be registered immediately after birth and shall have the right from birth to a name, the right to acquire a nationality and, as far as possible, the right to know and be cared for by his or her parents.

(United Nations, 1989, Article 7.1)

This means that states must make birth registration accessible and available to all children, including asylum seekers, refugees and immigrants, documented or otherwise.

If a child is not registered at birth and has no birth record, he or she will not have a birth certificate with that all-important proof of their name and their relationship with their parents and the state.

In 2000, an estimated 50 million babies – more than two-fifths of those born – were unregistered. These children have no birth certificate, the 'membership card' for society that should open the door to the enjoyment of a whole range of other rights including education and health care, participation and protection.

(UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2002)

Lack of birth registration is a violation of the child's inalienable human right to be given an identity at birth and to be regarded as a citizen within their community and nation. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child drew attention to the importance of making progress towards universal registration in General Comment 7:

The Committee notes that provision for registration of all children at birth is still a major challenge ... This can impact negatively on a child's sense of personal identity and children may be denied entitlements to basic health, education and social welfare.

(United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2005, Paragraph 25)

Martin Woodhead, Professor of Childhood Studies, The Open University, United Kingdom

- *Every child has the right to a name, nationality and legal identity.*
- *Universal birth registration is the prerequisite for realising that right.*
- *Without birth registration children may be denied entitlements to basic services.*



Identity at birth – and identity in development?

Children's awareness of gender, age and ethnicity develops early in life

While the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child* mentions children's identity solely in terms of establishing and respecting legal identity from birth, psychologists and social researchers treat identity as something that grows and changes during childhood. The *Convention* acknowledges these developmental processes through references (in the Preamble and in Articles 18, 23, 27, 29 and 32) to protecting and promoting 'physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development'. This position is further clarified and re-emphasised in General Comment 7 from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2005, Paragraph 5), as follows:

The Convention requires that children, including the very youngest children, be respected as persons in their own right. Young children should be recognized as active members of families, communities and societies, with their own concerns, interests and points of view.

Recognising even the tiniest baby as a distinct identity and personality is the starting point for understanding that children continue to develop a sense of their personal identity throughout their childhood, through their active, guided participation in the cultural life of their community (Rogoff, 1990). In this sense, identity is both a state of 'being' and a process of 'becoming' (Uprichard, 2008).

Young children's developing sense of personal identity is structured by their social, cultural and political context. The importance of gender, ethnic and religious identity is widely recognised and mirrors the significance attached to these factors in the child's immediate environment (Morrow and Connolly, 2006). Where children live in a family, community or society characterised by inequalities and/or conflicts, they (and their families) may experience exclusion or discrimination, and these experiences will shape children's growing identity, their sense of who they are, where they belong, and how far they feel valued and respected.

Martin Woodhead, Professor of Childhood Studies, The Open University, United Kingdom

- *Legal identity is established from birth, whereas personal, social and cultural identity grows and changes.*
- *Gender, ethnicity, and religion are among the factors that shape how children view themselves in relation to others.*
- *Where children grow up surrounded by discrimination and conflict, they may develop a negative sense of their identity.*



Constructing and reconstructing identity

Young children construct personal identity through relationships with others

Developing personal identity is a dynamic process embedded in the child's multiple activities and relationships in everyday settings at home, in the community and at preschool. Identity is best described as constructed, co-constructed and reconstructed by the child through his or her interactions with parents, teachers, peers and others. These dynamic processes include imitation and identification in shared activities, including imaginative role-play (Göncü, 1999). Non-verbal communication, dialogue and, later, text and electronic media are all key resources for constructing children's sense of who they are in relation to others. The everyday conflicts children witness – and contribute to even as babies and toddlers – are another important resource for personal identity (Dunn, 2004).

Developing personal identity is dynamic in other respects too. From the beginning, children are social actors with personal agency, with an awareness of 'self as subject', (or 'I'). This is complemented by a sense of 'self as object' (or 'me') which is more gradually emergent, changing and reflective (Miell, 1990). Identity encompasses both 'I' and 'me'. In the words of Bame Nsamenang, Director of the Human Development Resource Centre in Bamenda, Cameroon:

Identity is an agentic core of personality by which humans learn to increasingly differentiate and master themselves and the world. It gives meaning and purpose to life and perspective to human efforts. Through it, individuals come to situate themselves, for instance, as belonging to a distinct 'race', place, ethnicity, nationality, gender, or culture.

Another dynamic surrounds 'personal' versus 'social' identity. Personal identity refers to children's subjective feelings about their *distinctiveness* from others, their sense of uniqueness, of individuality. Social identity refers, on the other hand, to the ways in which they feel they are (or would like to be) the *same* as others, typically through identification with family and/or peer culture. Identity thus covers simultaneously two core human motives: the need to belong and the need to be unique (Schaffer, 1996, p. 80).

Martin Woodhead, Professor of Childhood Studies, The Open University, United Kingdom

- *Identity always has two distinct aspects – that of the unique individual person and that of the shared social person.*
- *The construction of identity through relationships with others is an essentially dynamic and social process.*
- *Identity is expressed through children's subjective feelings about themselves and about others.*



Young children talk about their age identity

Children establish their own identity through comparing themselves with other children

A child's age is an increasingly significant marker of changing identity in modern societies, where answers to the question 'How old are you?' strongly shape expectations for daily activities and behaviour. Age identity is clearly signalled in the way children are described, for example as a 'toddler', 'preschool child', 'kindergartner' or 'school pupil'. It is also signalled in the way children talk about themselves in relation to others, as illustrated by this conversation between a 3 year old and her preschool teacher:

- Child:* Do you know, my baby's one now.
Staff: Your baby's coming here when she's older.
Child: She'll go to playgroup when she's two, though.
Staff: Will she?
Child: Yeah. Because when you're two you go to ...
When I was two I went to a playgroup.
Other child: So did I.
Child: That shows you, that people go to playgroup when they're two.
Staff: Why do they go to a playgroup?
Child: Because they're not old enough to go to school.

(Tizard and Hughes, 1984, pp. 99–100)

Young children's reflections on their own age and status show that their understanding of the impact of the education system on their own lives begins at an early age:

I was looking forward to go to preschool for the first time. When I pass the preschool centre, I always tell my mother that I am old and that I need to be at preschool. My mother says no because I am too young, I'm still a baby. I replied that I am not drinking milk any longer. I am a big girl now, and I needed to go to school.

(Girl aged 4, Fiji; Tiko, 2006, personal communication)

You finish the study at preschool, if you don't go to school, where can you go? First, it's primary school, then, middle school and high school. And you get a job and then, you'll die – pass away. I mean, you'll become an old man.

(Boy aged 6, China; Ma, 2006, personal communication)



Identity – or identities?

In recent years, our understanding of the concept of 'identity' has changed, in two respects. The first of these reflects a growing recognition that children acquire something more complex than a unique and simple identity in their early years, one which remains stable throughout their lives and in different circumstances. Hence there is now a tendency to understand identity as a multiple construct or to describe individuals as acquiring multiple 'identities':

The self is by no means a simple, unitary concept but a highly complex organization of multiple constructs – interrelated, yet expressing a variety of different functions.

(Schaffer, 2006, p. 74)

The second arises from cross-cultural research, which has shown how identities are acquired or constructed in different ways in different societies, and that there is unlikely to be a universal model for this process. Earlier assumptions of universality, largely derived from a Western version of developmental psychology, have been repeatedly challenged by anthropologists, most famously by Clifford Geertz:

The Western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgment, and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively both against other such wholes and against its social and natural background, is, however incorrigible it may seem to us, a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world's cultures.

(Geertz, 1975, reprinted in Golberger and Veroff, 1995, p. 29)

Many psychologists now acknowledge that the liberal individualistic models of child development which underpinned Western theorising were founded on a narrowly ethnocentric understanding of the world. In complex modern societies, children may be viewed as acquiring a complex bundle of mixed and sometimes competing identities through their diverse early experiences.

Liz Brooker, Senior Lecturer in Early Childhood, Institute of Education, University of London, United Kingdom

- *Western conceptions of identity as a stable, individualised sense of self may be idealised, and may not reflect the diversity of cultural understandings.*
- *Modern identities are often complex and multifaceted, changeable over time and through new experiences.*
- *Changing cultural and social contexts, and new relationships, allow individuals to develop new or modified identities.*



Defining positive identity

A sense of individuality and a sense of belonging contribute to positive identity

Psychologists, practitioners and programme organisers agree that achieving a 'positive' sense of identity is a core goal. It is an important prerequisite for developing the resilience that enables a child or young person to meet the challenges of growing up, especially for children living in adverse environments. There is widespread agreement, too, that positive identity can be multifaceted, enabling children to call on different strengths, and different 'selves', in the different circumstances they meet. These selves are shaped by local environments and values, by the unique 'developmental niches' that children inhabit (Super and Harkness, 1977) and by their encounters with a succession of micro-systems during the course of their daily lives, including at home, with friends, in preschool and so on (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

There is, therefore, no universal recipe for achieving a positive sense of self; rather, positive identities are composed of those aspects of self-concept, self-esteem and self-belief which enable a child to feel a sense of both individuality and belonging in their social world, to develop appropriate cultural competences, knowledge and skills, and to achieve emotional well-being.

However, developing an identity is not always a positive process, and there is a risk of romanticising and idealising early childhood as a period of innocence. Research into children's early social relationships highlights ways in which children's 'positive' categories for self-differentiation and self-definition may sometimes have negative consequences for those who are defined as outsiders by an individual or group and experience themselves negatively, as excluded.

Young children's first task in identity formation is to differentiate themselves from their caregivers and from the environment that surrounds them, but before many months have passed they are also differentiating themselves from others on the basis of sex/gender, and then of race/ethnicity (Schaffer, 2006, pp. 83–5). A 'positive' sense of gender identity, for instance, may have as its corollary a negative view of the other sex, while early ethnic identification and ethnic preferences may be the precursor of racist beliefs and attitudes (p. 85).

Liz Brooker, Senior Lecturer in Early Childhood, Institute of Education, University of London, United Kingdom

- *Positive identities enable a child to feel a sense of both individuality and belonging in their social world.*
- *Positive self-identification may in some circumstances lead to negative categorisation of those belonging to other groups.*
- *Children growing up as members of excluded or dominated groups may have difficulty achieving a positive sense of self.*



POLICY QUESTIONS

- ◆ What steps can be taken to identify and overcome the remaining barriers to birth registration in many parts of the world?
- ◆ How far does the care and treatment of young children respect their individual identity from birth?
- ◆ How can young children be most effectively supported as they construct and reconstruct their sense of who they are in relation to their age, gender, ethnicity, and other key dimensions of difference?
- ◆ What strategies are needed in order to promote the development of positive identities among children growing up in minority, excluded or dominated groups?
- ◆ How can a positive sense of self be encouraged among all children, in ways that discourage some children from basing their positive identity on social discrimination and the exclusion of others?
- ◆ How far do stereotyped constructions of certain groups of children, as 'immigrants', 'ethnic minority', 'socially deprived', 'at risk' or 'street children' etc., undermine young children's ability to construct positive self-image, sense of possibility, and efficacy?



II.

Developing positive identities



Through [family] relationships children construct a personal identity and acquire culturally valued skills, knowledge and behaviours. In these ways, parents (and other caregivers) are normally the major conduit through which young children are able to realize their rights (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2005, Paragraph 16).

Family experiences offer children the opportunity to develop an identity which shares some of the cultural characteristics of the family and community, but is also unique to the individual child.

Family beliefs about child rearing and the goals for child development create different psychosocial environments for children; these include environments that promote individuality, those that promote a 'collective' identity and those that promote 'individuality within connectedness'.

Where young children grow up in adverse circumstances, supporting the identity and stability of their families may be the optimal means of supporting children's positive personal development.

As children move into group care and education, further sensitive support is needed to enable them to forge new identities which do not conflict with the family and cultural identity they have acquired at home.

Constructing cultural identity within families

Children's acquisition of a cultural identity starts with their early family experiences

Watching and listening to infants and toddlers, I have come to the view that being part of a culture is a need human beings are born with – that culture, whatever its contents, is a natural function.

(Trevarthen, 1995, p. 5)

Cultural identity is the feeling of 'belonging together' experienced by a group of people. It embodies the sentiments an individual feels of belonging to, or being influenced by, a group or culture. Some critics argue that, because it is based upon difference, cultural identity is divisive, and that cosmopolitanism should give individuals a greater sense of shared citizenship. In a religiously plural world it is important to ask how people of different faiths and with different religious identities can live justly and harmoniously together (Dreyer *et al.*, 2002). But differences in cultural or religious identity need not always be divisive. For instance, there is evidence that Africans living within the same household may be at peace with Christianity, Islam and African theodicy, and that they may concurrently identify with and use biomedicine and ethnomedicine.

What children learn, as they grow and develop, is not universal content but a cultural curriculum (Rogoff, 1990). The ongoing interactions between individual children and the culture they inhabit generate an almost infinite range of divergent practices and experiences, and promote an equivalent range of different 'desirable' identities among people living in different times and societies (Shweder, 1995). In this sense, the adult identity children grow to manifest reflects the ways that 'nurture' has channelled and nudged their biological characteristics to fit a specific cultural niche.

Familial processes are foundational to identity formation because, for most people, the most enduring lessons in interpersonal connectedness and self-definition occur in the family. Early learning within the family determines how children view the self, and how they enter into interpersonal encounters and engage with the world. These processes are achieved within many different family forms. The precise structure of any family is much less important than the fact that it is a safe and stable context for development.

Bame Nsamenang, Director, Human Development Resource Centre, Bamenda, Cameroon

- *Developing cultural identity is a fundamental task for all young children.*
- *Children acquire a sense of 'belonging' within their own culture which allows them to accept and coexist with individuals of other beliefs and cultures.*
- *Children's diverse experiences in families help to shape and channel their cultural pathway through childhood.*



Family cultures shape identity in unique ways

Being an individual and being connected are not necessarily contradictory

The image of identity development in many African cultures is that of 'polycropping', not monoculture; in other words, it emphasises the shared and social, rather than the unique and individual, aspects of identity. The development of the self is viewed, as in the more recent Western perspectives promoted by Vygotsky (1978), as essentially a social process. Traditional African cultures transcend Vygotsky, however, by sensitising children from an early age to seek out others and to extract 'intelligences' and define self, such that they can 'gain significance from and through their relationships with others' (Ellis, 1978, p. 6). In one specific example of this viewpoint, Zimba (2002) describes the South African Zulu as nurturing *umuntu umuntu ngabantu*, which means literally that 'a person is only a person with other people'.

By fostering children's close identification with the group, traditional social values in many African cultures align also with Erikson's (1968) focus on social development. African ceremonies of naming, marriage and death, for example, typically extend the identity of the individual by means of assimilating them into meaningful social roles and relationships. In a similar way, the peer cultures in many African societies tend to complement and extend the family's imprint on the developing individual. On the other hand, Cohen (2001, p. 6) argues that the process of identity formation can be problematic for some African children because their families 'have been caught up in the web of cultural transition where there are no longer clearly defined values and moral codes of behaviour that should be instilled in children and young people'.

The process of developing a sense of self is a process of connecting an individual's personal identity to their social identity. Individuality and connectedness are not dichotomous qualities; they develop together in the same child, within the same skin. In some traditional African cultures, children individuate by being interconnected with others and 'transform' en route to adult identity through responsible participation in real life tasks, (Nsamenang, 2004).

Bame Nsamenang, Director, Human Development Resource Centre, Bamenda, Cameroon

- *Many traditional African cultures have emphasised the shared and social, rather than the unique and individual, aspects of identity.*
- *Peer cultures can complement and extend family influences on children's developing identities.*



Supporting identities through parenting programmes

Successful programmes respect the funds of cultural knowledge that families bring to child-rearing

Children's identity during infancy and early childhood is closely enmeshed with the collective identity of their families and communities. Children who learn that their family or cultural group is stigmatised, or otherwise discriminated against, need additional support for their growing self-esteem and sense of worth. This support may be provided through support for their family.

Programmes designed to support children's identity development and well-being through support for parents are found in many Majority World countries. They range from informal, local self-help groups to highly structured programmes run by governments and non-governmental organisations. They include programmes focused on child rearing as well as those focused on future academic engagement (and success), and they may target any of the adults or peers who contribute to the child's development in context:

- guardians (for example, for AIDS orphans)
- teenage parents and single mothers
- fathers, grandparents, or extended family members raising children
- community health workers or outreach workers.

Working with limited resources, such programmes typically play several roles, including mutual emotional support, education, and an income-generation emphasis. There is typically input from a local or district/regional resource, which may provide technical assistance, material resources, and various forms of collaborative support.

In the past, family programmes were often based on deficit models where parents were viewed as in need of training and interventions because of their social class, cultural background, or limited proficiency in the dominant language (Swadener and Lubeck, 1995; Soto, 2002). Current programmes are framed in more positive ways and work to build capacity in marginalised communities through extensive local involvement and respect for local cultures. Such programmes respect the 'funds of knowledge' (Gonzales *et al.*, 2005) that families bring to child rearing. At the same time they recognise that a range of adverse circumstances surrounding the family may have a negative impact on children's developing identities.

What sets successful groups apart is the degree to which they respect parents and children, and recognise the importance of the child's developing sense of identity, both individually and as a member of an extended family, community or clan.

Beth Blue Swadener, Professor, Faculty of Education, Arizona State University, United States of America

- *Children living in adverse circumstances, or in communities who are stigmatised, can be supported in their developing sense of identity through support for their family or community.*
- *Respectful engagement with families can promote long-term benefits for children.*



The Mwana Mwende Project, Kenya

Family support encourages positive relationships with babies and young children

The Mwana Mwende Project was started in 1997 by a local non-governmental organisation, in response to concerns about the care of children under 3 years old and the welfare of teenage mothers. Studies carried out in this district had shown that family structures were changing, with fewer extended families and more teenage parents. Parents tended to spend long hours working away from home, for example in casual labour or petty trade. But most children under the age of 3 years were not admitted to preschools or formal childcare and were cared for at home. When parents went to work, they sometimes left their young children without adult supervision.

The project was particularly concerned about teenage mothers, whose numbers were rising. Earlier research (Bali and Kabiru, 1996) had shown that many teenage mothers lacked self-esteem and had little close interaction with their babies; even when breast-feeding they did not talk to them or engage with them. The project aimed to build the self-esteem of these mothers, enabling them to support their children's holistic development during the formative period of early infancy.

The project has demonstrated in particular the importance of training, education and support (Mwana Mwende, 2000). A training programme helps to initiate community development, to build self-esteem and confidence, to create group cohesiveness, and to encourage positive behaviour and attitudes. When young mothers are equipped with relevant skills and knowledge, they are able to join in initiatives that provide a better income, and thus to see themselves as contributing to the well-being of the community. Children growing up in this more positive environment are likely to develop a more positive sense of self.

In Mwana Mwende, the entire community, including children, young people, teenage parents, elders, preschool and primary teachers, village health workers, and local officials, have joined in supporting the welfare of the youngest children. When community members understand the benefits of a project, they share their time and resources willingly and work well among themselves. The project underscores the old proverb that it takes a village to raise a child.

Beth Blue Swadener, Professor, Faculty of Education, Arizona State University, United States of America (with **Margaret Kabiru** and **Anne Njenga** of the Mwana Mwende Project, Kenya)

- *Family support programmes can initiate sustainable improvements in community life.*
- *By improving parents' skills and self-esteem, these programmes foster a positive environment for young children's identity formation.*
- *Community involvement in training programmes helps to secure long-term benefits.*



The challenge for early childhood education and care

Children's social experiences serve as a 'mirror' for their changing identities

Developing positive identities touches on some fundamental questions facing every young child: 'Who am I?', 'Is it OK to be who I am?' and 'What is my place in this world?'

Answering these questions is crucial to every child's well-being, or in everyday language to 'feeling good' and 'being happy'.

For example, when Rajae, who is of Moroccan descent, went to fetch her 4-year-old daughter Dounia from kindergarten, the girl jumped into her arms, put her hand on Rajae's mouth and whispered in her ear: 'Please, Mum, never speak Arabic to me again when the other kids can hear you.'

Every day, parents and educators report cases like this. They serve as a reminder that children's identities are not only the result of the personal choices they make, nourished by the different reference groups they belong to. Identity is also the result of how other people define the young child, how he or she is understood (or not) and shown respect (or not). In these ways, children's social experiences serve as a 'mirror' for their identities.

Making the transition to early childhood education and care will often be children's first encounter with values and norms that are different from what they have known at home. Here they may discover that certain ways of being (symbolised through appearance, clothes, possessions, activities etc.) are favoured over others, that certain language groups are more valued than others, that certain family compositions are more 'normal' than others or that certain expectations of a 'polite attitude' are more appreciated than others. Children (as well as adults) are capable of complex code switching, continuously adapting their language, attitude and behaviour to various social settings and relationships. However, this becomes much more difficult when one important reference group (for example at the kindergarten) overtly or covertly, consciously or unconsciously, conveys messages that another important reference group (for example in the home) is not accepted. Young children like Dounia, in the example above, can all too often feel they are confronted with a forced choice, that identity is a matter of 'either/or', instead of a more inclusive 'and/and' that respects their multiple identities.

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- *Transition into the culture of an early childhood programme may challenge the secure identity a child has formed at home.*
- *Acquiring new identities compatible with the expectations of their new environment may involve a risky adaptation for young children.*
- *Children (and their parents) may face difficult identity choices.*



Beyond colour-blindness and tokenism

Sensitive provision for children enables them to celebrate all aspects of their identities

When considering identity development in migrant families, the traditional view has led to seeing migrant children and adolescents as having to bridge two cultures or value systems. In this dominant tradition, it was believed that many children either reject their home culture in favour of the dominant culture (assimilation), or on the contrary reject the dominant culture and cling to the traditional beliefs and values of their origins (separation), although the 'ideal' situation would be the integration of both worlds, recognising children's multiple identities. A European network of trainers, practitioners and researchers (Diversity in Early Childhood Education and Training (DECET)) has developed and documented many practices in Europe that support respect for multiple identities at this important stage of life (Vandenbroeck, 2001; DECET, online).

Educational practices that foster children's multiple identities need to avoid two pitfalls: colour-blindness and tokenism. Colour-blindness is the denial of differences, very often out of an honest concern to treat 'all children equal'. In practice this means that parents and children from minority communities are welcomed, but receive the (unintentional) message that they need to 'adapt' as soon as possible to what is considered 'normal' within the dominant culture.

Tokenism on the contrary involves treating the 'culture' of a child's home life as fixed and static. Parents' and children's identities are thereby reduced to their origin by assuming there is something called 'the Magreb culture', 'the Asian way of doing things', or 'a typical lesbian family'. In practice this means that special, yet stereotypical, events or displays are set up for children and families (such as a festival celebrating Iraqi new year with traditional clothes and food). Such activities risk being both patronising and stigmatising, in that they overlook the complexities of children's personal histories and family cultures and ignore socioeconomic and other differences.

An important way to avoid these pitfalls is to build real and symbolic bridges between the public culture of the early childhood centre and the private cultures of families, by negotiating all practices with the families involved.

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- *Colour-blindness denies differences, and gives parents and children the message that they need to 'adapt' to the dominant culture.*
- *Tokenism oversimplifies cultural differences and perpetuates stereotyped images of family life and childcare.*
- *Working closely with families enables programme staff to reflect each child's home experiences within early childhood settings.*



An innovative programme in Belgium

Early childcare centres can serve as a bridge between traditional child rearing and new cultural contexts

The Vormingscentrum voor de Begeleiding van het Jonge Kind (VBJK) (Resource and Training Centre for Early Childhood Education) set up a project in Brussels for newly arriving immigrants with young children. Because of a persistent shortage of funded childcare places, these families have traditionally had little access to good-quality childcare provision. They also have only very limited informal support networks, if any. Consequently immigrant mothers have few opportunities for accessing training, language courses or employment.

The project included four components:

- childcare provision to facilitate access to education, training and employment
- a positive recruitment strategy for ethnic minorities, including qualifying training, so that the cultural balance among staff would better reflect the population of Brussels
- intensive in-service training within childcare centres on issues of respect for diversity
- an ethnographic research study which explored immigrant mothers' views of childcare, and their conceptions of 'the good life' for their children.

The childcare centres adapted their intake procedures in order to learn from the mothers about caring for their children in accordance with their family cultures, their values and beliefs and, most of all, their mothering behaviour. The research study found that many mothers communicated regularly by telephone or e-mail with important reference people in their homeland (for example a sister, friend or grandmother). Knowing that the childcare centre was genuinely interested in their wishes and concerns, mothers felt able to share these experiences in ways that served as a bridge between the values of the centre and those of their homeland. The space and time offered by the project enabled them to shape a new multiple or hybrid identity, a personal mix of cherished traditions from the past and choices for the future in the new country. The childcare staff reported that these elaborated intake procedures and regular discussions with mothers were useful not only for newly arriving immigrants, but for all parents. They have now become general policy (VBJK, online).

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- *Childcare centres can adapt their practices to take a genuine interest in parents' wishes and concerns.*
- *Support for immigrant mothers' changing identity provides a safeguard for the their young children's developing identity.*
- *High-quality services for immigrant families may represent the 'best practice' for all families, including the most disadvantaged.*



POLICY QUESTIONS



- ◆ How far do policies for early childhood build on a fundamental respect for the family structures and cultures on which children's secure identities are founded?
- ◆ What range of family services are available, and what role do they play in supporting parents, especially the most disadvantaged?
- ◆ Is early childhood education and care provision accessible, affordable and attractive to all parents, including those most at risk of social exclusion?
- ◆ Does the diversity of programme staff reflect the (cultural, ethnic, gender) diversity of the populations addressed?
- ◆ What support is organised for early childhood professionals to take into account diversity and social inclusion?
- ◆ Are intake procedures sufficiently sensitive to enable both professionals and parents to learn from each other in a reciprocal way?
- ◆ How do early childhood provisions both support minority children in acquiring the dominant language, and nurture their multiple home languages?
- ◆ Where can parents from diverse backgrounds share their beliefs and concerns about the education of their children, across socioeconomic, ethnic, cultural or gender borders?





Identities, friendships and peer cultures



Developing friendships offer children new opportunities to explore and modify their identity.

Friendships support children as they undertake a range of transitions and changes in their identity, role and status. They help to promote positive feelings in situations where children feel vulnerable.

The discovery of peer cultures supports children's acquisition of a notion of 'child identity' which may be understood in relation to, or in opposition to, 'adult identity'.

Peer cultures offer opportunities for children to develop both positive and negative perspectives on themselves and on others who are like or unlike them. Through play with peers, children can explore the 'big issues' of the life course.

In a complex world, it is important for children to acquire the resilience which will sustain them through difficult and challenging circumstances.

The importance of friends

Early friendships add new dimensions to children's sense of who they are and where they belong

Children's experience of both having and being friends plays a critical part in their acquisition of social identity and selfhood.

(James, 1993, p. 201)

Children's scope for making friends, the numbers, character and intimacy of their friendships, and the extent to which they are able to decide who are their friends vary greatly. In Western societies, friendships become important as children make progressive transitions from the more or less closed world of their immediate family into the extended family and community, often into group care settings, and then into school. While interactions with family members remain significant, those with friends and peers offer new possibilities for self-categorisation and identification. Children who have interacted freely in the community with siblings and others of different ages, of the opposite sex, or of different ethnic groups, may learn to select playmates from children of the same age, sex and culture when they find themselves in preschool centres or settings. Peer relations are not always positive in their impact on children's sense of self, but successful friendships can enhance self-esteem and lay the foundations for future encounters with others. Friendship is most successful when it is mutually conceived and created, and reciprocated (Dunn, 2004).

Even very young children seek to develop interpersonal relationships and affiliations with each other and with members of their peer group (Laursen and Hartup, 2002). Young children value the same friendship dimensions of intimacy, support, trust and mutuality as do older children and adults (Dunn, 2004; James, 1993). Friendships are complex to build and maintain. Shared pretend play is an important resource for developing the emotional and moral qualities of friendship (Dunn, 2004) and allows children to experiment with a range of social roles and identities. As children participate in role-play they acquire a sense of themselves as future adults and future citizens, as well as experiencing an enhanced sense of their identity as children. An additional resource for bilingual children is the switching between languages as a way of managing their play negotiations (Cromdal, 2001).

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- *Children's first experience in out-of-home settings provides them with opportunities to develop new aspects of their identity, in particular through forming friendships.*
- *Friendships are important for children, even very young children, and adults. Friends help each other understand the world in which they live.*
- *Friendships may lead to new self-categorisations, including a stronger sense of the self as a child of a particular sex, ethnicity and age.*



The value of friends

Having friends is an important resource for developing identities

Establishing and sustaining friends over a lifetime is essential for individual well-being, and for emotional and social support over the life trajectory. Critical times can include transitions in school contexts, major family upheaval and personal life crises.

Friendships are important for children because friends help each other understand the world in which they live. It is known that the quality of children's friendships affects their development of a sense of personal and social identity, but more research is required to understand how friendship patterns and relationships are connected to children's moral, social and emotional development (Dunn, 2004).

Children with friends, even one friend, have better social skills and fewer adjustment problems. Friends provide social support and can protect against the difficulties of starting school, the birth of a sibling, family conflict and different family settings (such as stepfamilies), behaviour troubles, victimisation and bullying (Dunn, 2004; Dunn *et al.*, 2001). Children starting school seem to like school better and adjust better if they have formed friendships (Ladd, 1990).

It is not clear yet whether children's early friendships can positively affect adult adjustment, academic achievements and life fulfilment (Bagwell *et al.*, 1998). Further longitudinal studies are required that examine the value of early friendships in protecting against later social isolation and withdrawal. It may be that the collective experiences of friendship are as important as any particular relationship (Dunn, 2004). Children's friendships have typically been described based on interviews and very little research has been undertaken into how children actually manage their everyday friendships and social interactions. Further longitudinal research is also required to examine the role of friendships and their impact on the life trajectory as children move from childhood to adulthood.

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- *Friendships are another important component of children's developing identities, as they move out of family care and into group care settings.*
- *Friendships sustain well-being through periods of adversity or transition.*
- *Having friends and being liked by other children sustains children's sense of self, especially during vulnerable times.*



Friendships within peer cultures

Peer cultures allow children to taste independence from the world of adults

Friendships are often formed and sustained in social interactions within peer groups, especially in societies where children's activities are largely segregated from those of adults and older children. Same-age peers become children's daily companions in preschool classrooms, and even more so in age-grade schooling systems.

Peer culture mostly means young children doing things together. In the process they create 'a stable set of activities or routines, artefacts, values, and concerns that children produce and share in interaction with peers' (Corsaro and Molinari, 1990, p. 214).

Peer groups are often marked with features of popular culture, familiar rituals and repeated play routines, which provide resources for the children's interactions. These interactions may be regulated by entry and access negotiations within the play group, frequently linked to age, gender, use of the play rules, and ownership of the play materials (Cromdal, 2001; Danby and Baker, 1998, 2000; Goodwin, 1990; James, 1993).

Peer culture is also important for exploring and challenging the rules and authority of the adult culture (Corsaro and Eder, 1990), so that children's sense of themselves as children becomes a distinctive category. Contrary to popular belief, children do not mimic or passively accept the adult world.

The production of peer culture is a matter neither of simple interpretation nor of direct appropriation of the adult world. Children creatively appropriate information from the adult world to produce their own unique peer cultures. ... Thus, children's peer cultures have an autonomy.

(Corsaro and Eder, 1990, p. 200).

In peer cultures, children may shape and display a range of social identities, related to their gender, ethnicity etc. (Connolly, 1998; Kyratzis, 2004). While it is often suggested that boys are more likely to emphasise hierarchy and confrontation and girls more likely to emphasise intimacy and social exclusion (Ladd, 1999), this focus can ignore the complexity and diversity of children's social identities in social contexts.

Gender takes shape in complex interaction with other social divisions and grounds of inequality, such as age, class, race and ethnicity, and religion.

(Thorne, 1993, p. 109).

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- *Through social play and talk with peers, young children learn new values and behaviours.*
- *Entering peer culture offers children a clear sense of collective identity, which is distinct from that of adults.*



Positive identities may lead to negative beliefs

Developing positive identity can involve negative attitudes towards others

While social identities can have positive effects for some children, it is important to recognise that they can also have negative effects for others. Social identities are usually not developed in isolation but tend to be constructed by reference to others. Children will therefore define themselves not only by reference to the things they share in common with others in their own group but also by emphasising how they are different from those outside their group.

This is evident, for example, in relation to gender identities. Boys will tend to define themselves in terms of how different they are from girls, and vice versa. Thus constructions of masculinity have traditionally been characterised by traits such as being strong, independent and dominant, while constructions of femininity have been characterised in opposite ways, such as being weak, dependent and submissive.

This tendency to define oneself in opposition to others can also be seen in relation to children's racial identities. Research into the peer cultures of children aged 5–6 years in an inner-city, multi-ethnic primary school in England found that white girls tended to develop a sense of femininity and attractiveness through negative and stereotypical comparisons with South Asian girls. Similarly, African Caribbean and white boys tended to emphasise their own sense of masculinity by comparing themselves with the South Asian boys in the school, whom they constructed as weak and effeminate (Connolly, 1998; Van Ausdale and Feagin, 2001; Lewis, 2003).

What these examples have in common is the tendency for some groups of children to develop a strong social identity by contrasting themselves with and excluding others. However, it is important to recognise that there are differing motivations behind why children may exclude others. The exclusion of others may not always reflect the existence of negative out-group prejudices, as in the examples above, but may simply reflect the development of strong in-group preferences. This is evident among young Protestant and Catholic children in Northern Ireland. While they do not tend to hold negative attitudes towards each other they do show clear preferences for the cultures and traditions of their respective communities (Connolly *et al.*, 2002).

Paul Connolly, Professor of Education, School of Education, Queens University, Belfast, Northern Ireland

- *Children's allegiances to cultural (ethnic) identities interact with their maintenance of gendered identities, in complex ways.*
- *Growing up in a distinctive ethnic community may lead children to view those outside their own group in negative ways, as well as to feel positive about themselves and those like them.*



Children's collaborative work on identity

Children practise and perform their developing identities in collaboration with other children

Children try out their theories about their own identity, and that of their friends, through play and talk. These two examples are from England.

Three boys attending an inner-city, multi-ethnic school – Amit (South Asian), Clive and Mark (both White) – were very good friends and were always seen playing together on the playground at break and lunchtimes. They discussed their ethnic identities with the researcher:

Clive: I don't like Pakis!
Amit: You do like Pakis, stupid!
Clive: No, I don't – I only like you!
Interviewer: You like Amit, don't you Clive?
Clive: Yeah.
Interviewer: So, you said you don't like them – why not?
Clive: 'Cos he ain't a proper Paki!

The conversation demonstrates both the active role that children play collaboratively in the construction of their identities and the way they are capable of drawing and redrawing lines of inclusion and exclusion.

(Connolly, 1998, p. 135)

Three young girls playing in a garden in the north of England developed a role-play scenario to try out their knowledge about birth, loss and death:

Beth: Our mam had died ...
Katrina: Yeah, our mam had died.
Collette: And our dad.
Katrina: Yeah: no, our dad went away for a hundred years.
Collette: Yeah and we never saw him again did we?
[They next decide to play at being teenagers. Collette speaks to her baby.]
Collette: Your dad's gone away and you want him.
Katrina: That's not her dad it's her granddad.
Collette: Yeah. Can I have this baby born out of my tum?
Katrina: Yeah – but you look after it ...

The girls' play shows an awareness of their roles as females with a life course of events ahead of them as teenagers and adults.

(Siren Film & Video, 1999, p. 8)



Positive identities in a changing world

Recognising children's multiple heritage is the starting point for celebrating all aspects of their identity

The UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989) bestows 'a legal status on the right of one's own identity; on respect for the background of every child' (Vandenbroeck, 2001, p. 13). It guarantees every child's right to a heritage. Regrettably, however, many children around the world hide parts of their identities because dominant narratives make them ashamed to expose identities that are 'different' from the assumed norm.

Immigrant and multiracial children may have few opportunities to claim their identity. In many countries, official tallies of individuals allow for only one racial or ethnic identity, thereby denying some citizens their multiple heritage (Chiong, 1998). Since having a multiple ethnic or racial heritage may prove problematic for a child's development (Herring, 1992), it is important to support immigrant and multiracial children in acquiring a positive self-concept.

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Individuals do not belong to one cultural group any more: they may adhere to one or more language groups, to one or more nationalities, and to one or more families. Each of these groups has specific values and norms, which are shared by their members. Each group may contribute to the individual's concept of who he or she is (a concept that will change throughout the lifespan); conversely, each individual will also influence the culture – norms, values, codes and social roles – of the group. Today, belonging to one reference group, such as a nationality, no longer automatically entails belonging to another related reference group, such as a language or religion.

Those reference groups that shape cultural identities are to a large extent chosen, and important decisions in life (to marry or stay married, to have children, to vote for a particular party in elections) are much less moulded by tradition than by choice (at least in our perceptions). In the era of globalisation, many authors choose not to talk about cultural identity anymore, but use plural terms, such as multiple identities, hybrid identities, hyphenated identities, or the polygamy of belongings. This is true not only for individuals with a family history of migration but for all individuals, since the society our parents had in mind when we were children bears no resemblance to the society in which we live as adults.

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- *The dominance of particular cultural expectations can make it difficult for children to claim their identity.*
- *The idea of a single cultural identity is increasingly challenged by globalisation, migration, and rapid change.*



Achieving a resilient identity

Early childhood programmes can help children to acquire and maintain resilience

The quality of resilience can be identified even in young and vulnerable children. It is most commonly defined as 'normal development under difficult circumstances' (after Fonagy *et al.*, 1994, p. 233). Krovetz (1999) has identified four strands to this attribute: social competence, problem-solving skills, autonomy, and a sense of purpose. All these qualities may be inculcated in young children through skilful and sensitive caregiving. All are needed for children to feel confident in facing future circumstances that threaten their identity and well-being.

It is unlikely that children will develop these qualities without support. The task for parents and adults working with young children is to provide opportunities for particular aspects of their resilience to be strengthened. For many children, a secure environment and a sense of belonging are sufficient to enable them to face new challenges. Programmes which emphasise group – rather than individual – activities and achievements, and which advocate the importance of effort in resolving difficulties, help children to develop additional sources of strength.

Resilient children are able to move into new phases of their lives, including into more formal learning environments, without feeling disheartened or discouraged. Their self-belief assures them that there is usually a solution to problems, and that their own efforts are usually rewarded by success. Such beliefs are similar to those identified by Dweck and Leggett (1988) as 'mastery' dispositions, seen in children who take risks and embrace new experiences without fear of failure. At the other extreme are children with 'helpless' dispositions, who are pessimistic about their own abilities to produce positive outcomes, and lack the courage to keep on trying.

Resilience is linked with two other attributes acquired by children in well-run programmes: reciprocity, a collaborative spirit which values shared activities and the contributions of peers; and resourcefulness, the ability to identify the most important resources (including human resources) for resolving any difficulty, large or small, in any environment (Brooker, 2008).

Early childhood programmes which foster such attributes can equip children with the tools they will need to sustain their sense of positive identities – in the present and in the future.

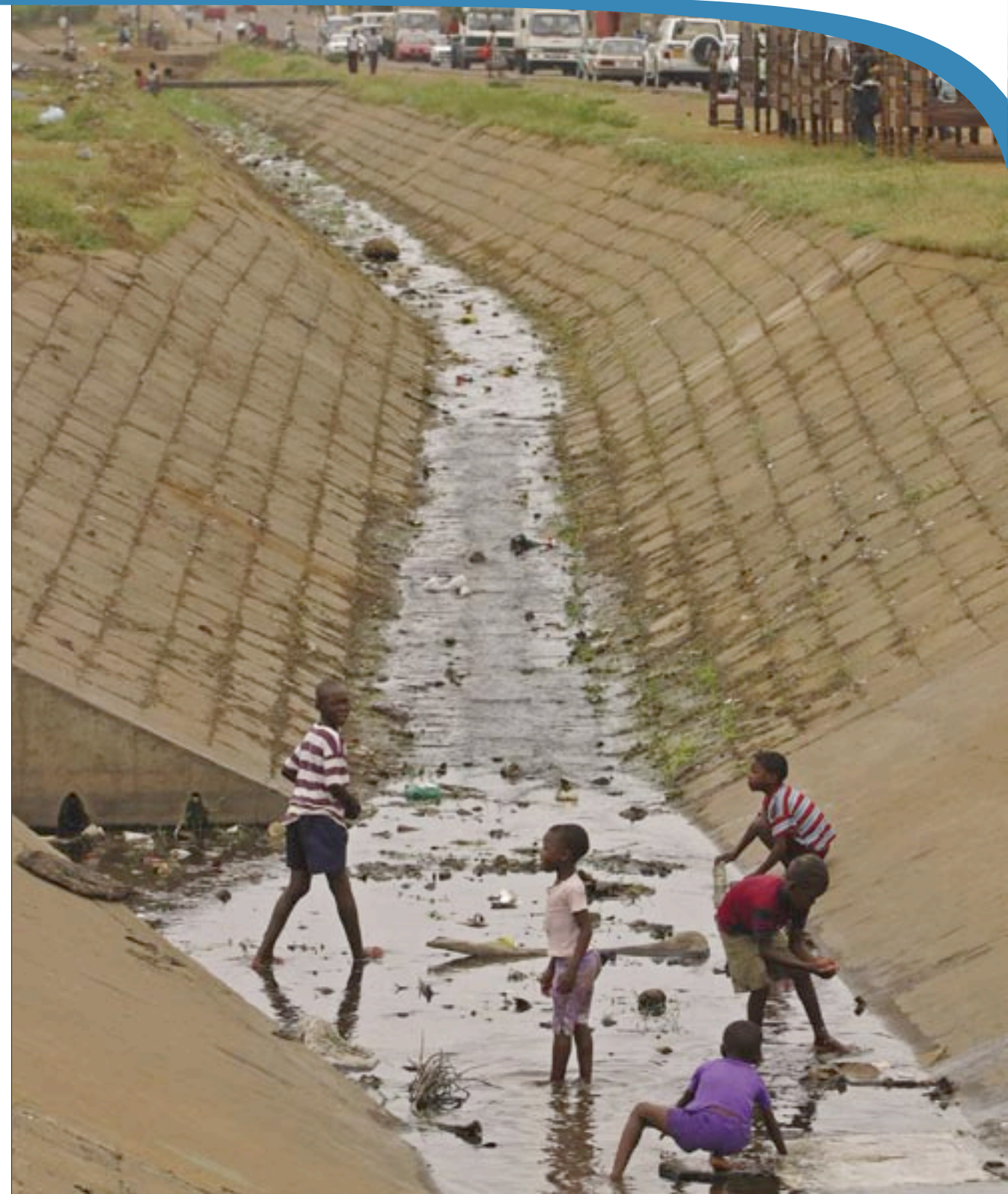
Liz Brooker, Senior Lecturer in Early Childhood, Institute of Education, University of London, United Kingdom

- *Encouraging resilience in young children can contribute to their developing positive identities.*
- *Resilient children are better able to confront the challenges of reconciling the complexities of moving between different settings, cultures and identities.*



POLICY QUESTIONS

- ◆ How far is the significance of children's friends and their peer group recognised in early childhood policies and practices?
- ◆ Are opportunities available to children to develop their own sense of shared identity without undue interference from adults?
- ◆ How can children be encouraged to feel positive about their own identity while discouraging negative beliefs about others of different gender, ethnicity, religion etc.?
- ◆ What role can early childhood services play in promoting inclusive attitudes among young children, towards each other as well as their families?
- ◆ What strategies ensure that individual children have the resilience to retain a positive sense of themselves despite the many challenges they may face?
- ◆ How are diverse local communities involved in shaping early childhood policies on issues surrounding the promotion of social inclusion and positive identities?



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- p. 34 – Khulna, Bangladesh. Children play spin a top, a local game of Bangladesh, also played worldwide. It is now only played by village children and lower-middle-class children, though once it was very popular among all the children of Bangladesh. Usually it is a group play.
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Developing positive identities touches on some fundamental questions facing every young child: 'Who am I?', 'Is it OK to be who I am?' and 'What is my place in this world?'

Answering these questions is crucial to every child's well-being, or in everyday language to 'feeling good' and 'being happy'.

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